



Commonwealth of Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet

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Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission Receives Generous Bequest *\$202,000 designated to purchase and protect land*

FRANKFORT, Ky. (Oct. 19, 2012) – The Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission (KSNPC) became the recipient of an unexpected and much appreciated bequest that will make possible the protection of 1,591 forested acres along Laurel Fork in Whitley County.

The late William Dennis Benge, of Fort Wright, Ky., bestowed a generous \$202,000 donation upon the commission. KSNPC's land acquisition specialist, J. Brent Frazier took the call from the lawyer representing the estate. "I was surprised when the attorney began explaining the purpose of her call. I was caught between sympathy for the family and elation at the news I was receiving."

Donald S. Dott Jr., director of the commission, spoke to attorneys at Barrett and Weber, representing the Benge estate and a family friend and learned more details. Benge, who passed away on Dec. 21, 2011, had always felt a strong connection to the land and held a deep desire to leave a legacy behind. Elaine Taylor, a longtime friend, said, "Mr. Benge was born in Kentucky and raised in rural Kenton County. He had fond memories of playing in the woods and his love of the outdoors later grew into a hobby of nature photography."

Preserving nature in photos apparently spawned a desire to save the land itself and he left the commission a generous donation to purchase land for a state nature preserve.

Currently, the plans are to combine the bequest with a grant from the Heritage Land Conservation Fund (HLCF), which receives funds from the sale of "Nature's Finest" license plates. The land purchase is a 1,591 acre forested tract along Laurel Fork in Whitley County, which will protect part of one of the largest forest blocks in Kentucky. It lies in the watershed of Laurel Fork, which is home

to several rare fish and mussel species. The area has also been called “South America” since the late 1800s because it is so remote.

“We are very fortunate to have received this timely bequest for the Laurel Fork project. It will establish a new nature preserve for the state and is an impressive acquisition involving multiple partners,” said commission chairman Carl Breeding.

The commission will purchase the land from the Kentucky Natural Lands Trust (KNLT), a non-profit organization, directed by Hugh Archer. “KNLT purchased the land from the owner, paid for its first survey and cleared title issues,” Archer said. “It will be sold to the commission at a discount, and supported by funds from the Indiana Bat Mitigation Fund, which is overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).”

Lee Andrews, supervisor of the USFWS Kentucky field office commented, “The USFWS is pleased to be able to help make this purchase happen. Protecting the forested slopes of Pine Mountain in Whitley County and a small hibernaculum for the Indiana bat will conserve important habitat for this endangered species. This is especially critical as these beneficial insect eating mammals are being decimated by White Nose Syndrome in many parts of the country.”

American Electric Power, whose local subsidiary, Kentucky Power serves a significant portion of eastern Kentucky, also provided funds to make the purchase possible through a grant provided under a consent decree with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), under the Clean Air Act.

Breeding recognized the importance of partnerships in these days of fiscal austerity. “We are fortunate that Mr. Bengé’s legacy provides the opportunity to protect the Laurel Fork watershed. We welcome the newest state nature preserve in the Commonwealth thanks to Mr. Bengé’s vision.”

To learn more about the commission and its work protecting natural lands and rare and endangered species, contact the office at 502-573-2886, visit online at <http://naturepreserves.ky.gov> or Facebook at <http://facebook.com/ksnpc>.

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